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ABSTRACT

There is little doubt that the field of public relations needs to be concerned with both the ethical standards and behaviors of practitioners and the perceptions of these standards and actions held by clients, other communications professionals, and the public. What constitutes ethical standards and practices, however, continues to be debated among practitioners, who face four specific ethical problems. The first is truthfulness in public relations practice. Practitioners must attempt to be as well informed about their subject matter as possible prior to the release of their statements and should disclose any self-interest in the matter that they are communicating. The second dilemma is balancing the need for research with the right of privacy. Market audience research raises the issues of disclosing the purpose and source of the research to survey subjects and how the data will be used once collected. The third problem is persuasion as the goal of the practice. While department labels often mask persuasion as "information" or "education," persuasion is a legitimate goal of public relations, and campaigns that are merely "informative" or "educational" are indeed persuasive. The fourth problem is accountability of activity. Accountability, or measuring the effect of public relations campaigns, receives little attention from researchers, educators, practitioners, or even clients. But awareness, information levels, perceptions, attitudes, and support can and should be measured. Clients would perceive practitioners in a more positive ethical light if they received tangible assurance that the goals of the public relations campaign have been accomplished. (HTH)

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ESSAYS ON ETHICS IN COMMUNICATION

IN HONOR OF

DR. EDNA C. SORBER

Issues In The Ethics of Public Relations

by

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ISSUES IN THE ETHICS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The profession of public relations is one of the fastest growing areas in communication. Fraser P. Seitel (1984) reports that

> more than 100,000 practitioners work in public relations in the United States alone. The Public Relations Society of America, organized in 1947, boasts a growing membership of over 10,000 in about eighty chapters nationwide. The Public Relations Student Society of America---has over 3,000 student members at more than eighty colleges and universities. More than 2,000 U.S. companies have public relations departments. More than 700 public relations agencies, some billing millions of dollars per year, exist in the United States. More than 200 trade associations have public relations departments (p. 38).

The growth of the profession has been accompanied by a similar growth in PR education. "By 1980, there were 18,000 students enrolled in public relations degree programs. Public Relations graduate enrollment in 1980 stood at around 4,000 students - nearly double the entire student enrollment in public relations degree programs ten years earlier (Seitel, 1984, p. 35)."

Not only is the field of PR growing it is changing. One major change is that public relations is truly becoming a two-way communication activity. Rather than being exclusively senders of messages, PR practitioners are now also perceivers or receivers of messages sent to their company either directly or indirectly. As Phyllis McGrath (1976) puts it, "one of the basic mandates of the public relations practitioner is to anticipate changes and upcoming issues (p. 19)."

The second major role change for PR practitioners is that they are becoming more involved in corporate decision-making. As Simon (1980) points out public relations offices can and should be involved in the corporate line, not merely as a staff function. As the public relations practitioner moves from a support function into a line position the responsibility for the impact of corporate decisions on the environment, economy, and the public must be accepted.

While there is little doubt that the practice of public relations has changed in the past decade the image of what the PR person does has not had a

similar evolution. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the area of ethics. A great deal of the common perception of the lack of ethics among PR practitioners can be traced to the use of the term "public relations" by a variety of people. Newsom and Scott (1981) report the incident where, "Chicago police picked up a prostitute in a bar for soliciting. She had been handing out cards with her name, phone number and address. Below her name were printed two words: Public Relations (p. 419)."

Most corporate executives recognize the professional standards of the PR practitioner; however, "there will always be some in the business world convinced that all they need is a lawyer to keep them out of jail and a PR practitioner to keep bad news out of the newspapers (Newsom and Scott, 1981, p. 420)."

There is little doubt that the field of public relations needs to be concerned with both the ethical standards and behaviors of practitioners and the perceptions of these standards and actions that are held by clients, other communications professionals and the general public. Ironically little formal research has been conducted in this area. Donald Wright (1982) points out that, "empirical research on ethics and public relations is virtually non-existent. Even qualitative writings on the subject are scarce (p. 12)."

This lack of formal research, however does not mean that the public relations profession has not struggled with the issue. In a recent survey of PR educators it was reported that 83.8% of all introductory PR courses contain a section on ethics. Even more indicitive of the concern for ethics among educators was their response to the value of covering ethics in their introductory course. The respondents in this national study gave "ethics" a mean score of 4.55 on a 5 point scale. Only the topic of the "definition of PR" rated higher with a mean score of 4.57 (Hamilton, 1983, p. 16).

Practitioners are also highly concerned with ethical standards and

practice in public relations. The Public Relations Society of America adopted the Code of Professional Standards (see Appendix A) in 1954. The Code was revised in 1959, 1963 and in 1977. In the code PR practitioners pledge:

> To conduct ourselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness and responsibility to the public;
>
> To improve our individual competence and advance the knowledge and proficiency of the profession through continuing research and education;
>
> And to adhere to the articles of the Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations as adopted by the governing Assembly of the Society.

Violations of the PRSA code of standards can result in censure and/or suspension. "The first penalty for violation was meted out in 1962, when a member was censured for attempting to take away the account of another member (Cutlip and Center, 1982, p. 586)." During the remainder of the decade of the 60's six members were censured or suspended. "In the 1970's 46 complaints were filed with the grievance board (Cutlip and Center, 1982, p. 586)."

While censure and/or suspension by the Public Relations Society of America may be professionally embarrassing, it in no way would prevent the convicted party from continuing to function as a PR practitioner. In fact Cutlip and Center report that one member resigned his membership after being formally accused of a code violation. The resignation meant the termination of the case before it was heard by the judicial panel (Cutlip and Center, 1982, p. 586).

The issue of enforcement of ethical codes leads naturally to a discussion of licensure. It would be safe to say that there is no consensus among educators or practitioners on this topic. In their excellent review of this hotly debated issue Cutlip and Center (1982) note that as far back as 1953 Edward L. Bernays argued strongly for licensure to exclude those who are not properly qualified. While Cutlip and Center argue in favor of licensure, e.g."

Codes of behavior will lack wholly effective means of enforcement until there is legal certification of practitioners. Controlled access is the sine qua non of a recognized profession (p. 587);" they do go on to explain the legal obstacles to licensure. Namely a profession wanting to license its members must show a compelling state interest. However the courts have ruled that even abusive communication merits protection. A second legal obstacle is the guarantee of freedom of expression. While no one is constitutionally guaranteed the right to practice medicine, all citizens are guaranteed the right to expression. Any attempt to limit the right of any citizen to express his or her views, regardless of their formal communication training, has been consistently upheld in court

With the prospects of a national licensing policy being remote the ethical standards and practices of public relations practitioners will continue to be an individual decision. Perhaps Chester Burger, head of Chester Burger and Company in New York, expressed this laissez faire philosophy when he said, "ethics are nothing but standards of behavior, and who among us is qualified to suggest that his or her standards deserve to be followed by others (Burger, 1982, p. 13)." Donald Wright extends this approach to study of ethics in public relations by writing, "--- the study of public relations ethics must be more situational than theoretical (Wright, 1982, p. 12)."

If as Burger and Wright suggest, ethical decisions in public relations are individual and situational, then an examination of specific ethical dilemma faced by PR practitioners is in order. The remainder of this paper examines four such situations: 1. Truthfulness in communications with the public, 2. The need for research and the right of privacy, 3. The legitimacy of persuasion as a goal of public relations activities, and 4. Accountability of public relations projects.

I. Truthfulness in PR practice: The most obvious issue involved with this area is one that, according to practitioners, rarely occurs, i.e., being asked to lie by a client or corporate CEO. As Burger noted, "my experience tells me that in the real world we are rarely, if ever, asked to lie. Our problems arise when we attempt to decide what is and what is not the truth, and how we should communicate our conclusion (p. 13)."

Obviously the public relations firm, or corporate PR officer who speaks "for the company," is generally perceived by the public to be knowledgeable about the issue at hand. In order to make judgements concerning the validity of the client's case a communicator needs knowledge. Indeed in order "...to behave in an ethical way, to separate fact from lie, one needs to be broadly informed and well educated (Burger, 1982, p. 16)."

Lack of information regarding the truthfulness of a client's claim is most often faced by the independent PR agent who may contract to complete a project with little time for background investigation. Often the PR counselor simply lacks expertise in the technical details he/she is communicating.

The corporate PR officer, on the other hand would have greater access to, and understanding of the issues surrounding a controversial story. However even in this situation an aura of distrust exists. William Genthe, general manager of Rexnord Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin reports "that 60% of the journalists, in an American Management Association study, believe that businessmen are not honest with their own public relations departments (Genthe, 1982, p. 29)."

The first, and most obvious admonition must be for public relations practitioners to attempt to be as well informed about their subject matter as possible prior to the release of their public communications.

A second, and more subtle issue in "truth saying" involves the communicators self-interest. The basic concept expressed in the social judgment

theory of Sherif and Hovland, as described the late Carolyn Sherif, states that:

> When a part of the self-system is aroused, our judgments are affected. Judgments of highly involved persons differ strickingly from those who don't care about the matter. But why? The answer is relatively simple: Even though told to be as objective as possible and to make judgments solely in terms of how pro or con a statement on the issue really is, a highly involved person cannot help using those views that are personally acceptable---(Sherif, 1976, p. 182).

To be sure, the PR officer is highly "involved" with the issue he/she is communicating. Even assuming a high level of knowledge, social judgment theory warns that what genuinely appears to be an honest an unbiased account, may indeed be slanted.

The consumer of most public relations releases are aware of this built-in bias when the source of the information is directly linked with the issue. However, many stories carried in the media do not cite the source, or if they do, they do not disclose the involvement of the source with the matter being covered. Some practitioners, Burger (1982) for one, maintains that, "---it is our responsibility as communicators to disclose our self-interests in any matter about which we are communicating (p. 16)."

The issue of truthfulness in communicating is not a simple matter of avoiding lies, but rather a more complex matter involving completeness of knowledge, awareness of bias and disclosure of self-interest.

II. Need for research and the right of privacy: Public relations research, both quantitative and qualitative, is becoming an integral part of PR campaigns and projects. One of the basic rules for good communication is to adapt the message to the target audience. In order to accomplish this "adaptation" the source must conduct an audience analysis. With the availability of vast databanks and sophicated survey techniques, this seemingly innocent admonition to "know your target audience" takes on a more ominous ethical question. As

Newsom and Scott (1981) point out:

> During the 1960s and 1970s there was increasing concern about data banks with information on individuals. The concern resulted in legislation. The Freedom of Information Act and a consumer credit bill were passed to allow people to see just what government and business had on them. Nevertheless, both public and private institutions continue to gather substantial data due to the many different types of public registration (auto and boat licenses, building permits, and so on) and mailing lists. The existence of the information is a problem in the sense that there is an enormous potential for misuse. (emphasis added, p. 424).

Not all PR research limits itself to scanning existing data. Indeed the use of surveys by PR practitioners is now a commonly accepted activity. Two major ethical issues arise when surveys are conducted. First, is the survey respondent aware of the purpose of the research or are "desceptive" introductions used by the caller to gain compliance. Thinly disguised sales pitches are routinely denounced by survey researchers. A far more serious question, however, is the balance between "not revealing the identity of the client in order not to bias the response," and the right of the respondent to know who is making the inquiry, and why.

The second ethical issue involves the use of the data once they are collected. Who shall be allowed to see the results? How will they be used? Will all of the results be released or only those most favorable to the client? Will the results be used to directly harm any individual, i.e. will people be fired from their jobs, or made a target of extensive persuasive appeals such as direct mail, phone calls, or personal contacts?

The need for strict adherence to promises of an anonymity is perhaps the single most important ethical concern in survey research. Questionnaires that promise anonymity & then "code" the survey instrument in order to identify specific individuals should be subject to legal action. Not only is the misuse of survey data unethical, it will, if continued, make future surveys meaningless. In a somewhat related matter voters in the recent Illinois

Democratic presidential primary were urged to "lie to exit pollsters" in order to confound the projections made by the media.

PR research, if used by skilled communicators, can be a powerful tool in the persuasion process. Great care must be taken to insure the rights of all citizens in matters pertaining to their privacy. Interestingly, even the latest PRSA Code does not address itself directly to ethical standards in research.

III. Persuasion as a goal in PR practice: When one examines the names of PR departments an interesting pattern emerges. The majority are labeled departments of, "public information," "public affairs," "customer relations," "consumer information" etc. When the corporation, either through its own PR staff or via a PR agency, sets out to accomplish some public relations objective we most always hear about the new, "information campaign," or "education project" or, "awareness advertising." On the other hand, has anyone ever heard of a "department of public propaganda" or a new project for "public opinion manipulation?"

Do PR practitioners use these euphemisms to hide their persuasive goals? Or, do practitioners truly disdain the notion of purposely attempting to persuade? If it is the former then the ethical question of honesty vs. deception is the issue. If it is the latter, then they are deceiving themselves. It is the position of this paper that, first, persuasion is a legitimate goal of PR, and second, that campaigns that are merely "informative" or "educational" are indeed persuasive.

A concise summary of this position was reflected by Bert Bradley (1981) when he asserted that the central role of a PR practitioner is to be an advocate for his/her company or client. Further, advocacy by its nature, requires a stated goal of persuasion, or influence of the target population by the advocate.

But what of the practitioner who earnestly claims that he or she is only interested in "informing" the public? The obvious question then becomes, what is the goal or objective of such a campaign? To merely "raise" the information level of the public? Or to change the information the public has so that in turn their actions vis a vis the client or company will be more in accord with client or company interests. While informing the public for purely altruistic reasons may be noble, it is highly unlikely that no other goal would be involved.

Even if the PR informers had no ulterior motive other than information change, most attitude theorists would argue that a significant change in the cognitive element of an attitude will affect the other elements and thus create "attitude change." As Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) put it, "... beliefs are the basic determinants of behavior. It follows that, in the final analysis, behavior change is brought about by producing changes in beliefs (p. 223)." Further, information is the basic determinant of a belief, even if that information is faulty or based on incomplete knowledge.

Newsom and Scott (1981) claim, "in public relations you become a consenting attitude-change agent (p. 424)." Why then, do some PR practitioners shy away from recognizing, or admitting, that they are attitude-change agents? It may be that many PR practitioners received their degrees in journalism departments where the idea of persuasion is not viewed as an ethical practice. In fact, William B. Toran (1978) writing in Journalism Educator quoted a veteran newsman-turned-professor who blatantly told his students, "PR people are just a bunch of whores (p. 37)."

Public relations, if it is indeed a basic advocacy activity, obviously deals in persuasion. The ethical nature of persuasion has been debated since before the writing of Aristotle and it no doubt will continue. However public relations practitioners and students must recognize that PR does involve persuasion and that persuasion per se is not unethical.

IV. Accountability of PR activity: Regardless of whether one is buying a new car, a mail order diamond ring, or a PR campaign the customer has a right to get what he/she pays for. Accountability, or measuring the effect of PR campaigns receives little attention from scholarly researchers, educators, practitioners or even clients.

Mark McElreath (1980) documents the lack of evaluation when he points out that, "no more than half of today's practitioners formally evaluate their public relations activities on a regular basis (p. 5)." In fact, McElreath goes on to point out that "---practitioners in the United States today spend less than five percent of their budget on evaluating public relations activities (p. 6)." One major reason cited for this lack of evaluation were that "practitioners lacked the proper education and training in evaluating research (p. 7)." The other most often heard reason was that PR work is just not measurable.

It is the position of this paper that "awarness," "information levels," "perceptions," "attitudes," "support," etc. can, and should be measured. However the central issue for this report concerns the ethical decision not to evaluate what has been done. Basically PR practitioners should take great care in clearly defining what it is they are providing. If the agency promises to provide "X" amount of stories for release, or "Y" amount of video tapes to be shown to customers etc. then accountability is easy.

If, on the other hand, the goals of a PR campaign are to "change attitudes," or even only to "make the public more aware," then the client has the right to know if the goal was accomplished. Article thirteen of the PRSA Code states that, "A member shall not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control." To be sure, this article typically refers to PR agencies who promise to "get 'X' amount of publicity" in order to land a contract. However the implications are even more significant if an agency promises to accomplish goals that they cannot, or will not measure.

Obviously not all persuasive campaigns are successful. However the science of public relations would be well served if more research was directed at creating valid and economical techniques of evaluating PR activities. Needless to say clients would be more likely to perceive PR practitioners in a more positive ethical light if they could receive something more tangible than the assurance that, "while we can't measure what effect our campaign had, we think it worked," line. Ethical professionals do not promise outcomes that they cannot measure.

SUMMARY

Public relations is growing in terms of the number of practitioners in the field and the number of college students enrolled in PR programs. It is also undergoing significant changes in that PR is now a two-way communication activity and the advice of those who practice public relations is being sought by corporate executives in critical decision making processes. Unfortunately, the image of the PR professional as being a slick, say-anything-do-anything huckster has not changed as rapidly.

Although little formal quantitative or qualitative research has been done in the area of ethics in public relations, educators and practitioners are concerned with this issue. Ethics plays a major role in PR education and the national Public Relations Society of America has enacted a voluntary Code of Professional Standards.

Ultimately the ethical practices of PR practitioners is an individual issue. Four such major situations were examined in this report: 1. Truthfulness in PR communications, 2. Research and the right of privacy, 3. Persuasion as a legitimate goal of PR practice, and 4. Accountability of PR projects.

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APPENDIX A

PUBLIC RELATIONS SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Code of Professional Standards
for the Practice of Public Relations
Adopted and Effective April 29, 1977

(This Code, adopted by the PRSA Assembly, replaces a similar Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations previously in force since 1954 and strengthened by revisions in 1959)

Declaration of Principles

Members of the Public Relations Society of America base their professional principles on the fundamental value and dignity of the individual, holding that the free exercise of human rights, especially freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press, is essential to the practice of public relations.

In serving the interests of clients and employers, we dedicate ourselves to the goals of better communication, understanding and cooperation among the diverse individuals, groups and institutions of society.

We pledge:

To conduct oursleves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness and responsibility to the public;

To improve our individual competence and advance the knowledge and proficiency of the profession through continuing research and education;

And to adhere to the articles of the Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations as adopted by the governing Assembly of the Society.

Articles of the Code

These articles have been adopted by the Public Relations Society of America to promote and maintain high standards of public service and ethicla conduct among its members.

1. A member shall deal fairly with clients or employers, past and present, with fellow practitioners and the general public.

2. A member shall conduct his or her professional life in accord with the public interest.

3. A member shall adhere to truth and accuracy and to generally accepted standards of good taste.

4. A member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those involved, given after a full disclosure of the facts; nor place himself or herself in a position where the member's interest is or may be in conflict with a duty to a client, or others, without a full disclosure of such interests to all involved.

5. A member shall safeguard the confidence of both present and former clients or employers and shall not accept retainers or employment which may involve the disclosure or use of these confidences to the disadvantage or prejudice of such clients or employers.

6. A member shall not engage in any practice which tends to corrupt the integrity of channels of communication or the processes of government.

7. A member shall not intentionally communicate false or misleading information and is obligated to use care to avoid communication of false or misleading information.

8. A member shall be prepared to identify publicly the name of the client or employer on whose behalf any public communication is made.

9. A member shall not make use of any individual or organization purporting to serve or represent an announced case, or purporting to be independent or unbiased, but actually serving an undisclosed special or private interest of a member, client or employer.

10. A member shall not intentionally injure the professional reputation or practice of another practitioner.

However, if a member has evidence that another member has been guilty of unethical, illegal or unfair practices, including those in violation of this Code, the member shall present the information promptly to the proper authorities of the Society for action in accordance with the procedure set forth in Article XIII of the Bylaws.

11. A member called as a witness in a proceeding for the enforcement of this Code shall be bound to appear, unless excused for sufficient reason by the Judicial Panel.

12. A member, in performing services for a client or employer, shall not accept fees, commissions or any other valuable consideration from anyone other than the client or employer in connection with those services without the express consent of the client or employer, given after a full disclosure of the facts.

13. A member shall not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control.

14. A member shall, as soon as possible, sever relations with any organization or individual if such relationship requires conduct contrary to the articles of this Code.